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SUBJECT: SYRIA'S KAMAL LABWANI READS STATEMENT IN COURT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (SBU) Jailed opposition activist Kamal Labwani appeared July 16 in criminal court and read a three-page statement on his own behalf to explain his televised Al-Hurra and Mustaqbal interviews in late 2005 in which he called for diplomatic pressure to bring political changes in Syria. An animated Labwani said that he did not call for the application of military or economic pressure on Syria, but rather the same kind of political pressure that even allies sometimes exercise with one another, as in the case of the U.S. and Israel. Labwani's statement, which was in Arabic, also contained a reference to the "corrupt" Syrian government, prompting the judge to bang his gavel. At the completion of Labwani's statement, members of his extended family and Syrian activists burst into applause and were evicted from the courtroom.

¶2. (SBU) Following Labwani's statement, one of Labwani's two-person defense team, Muhanned al-Hasani, read a lengthy statement to protest actions by Syrian security and jail officials who are preventing Labwani from meeting privately with his lawyers to prepare the defense. (Note: A third member of the defense team, former Damascus Spring detainee Habib Issa, recently withdrew from the defense out of frustration over his inability to prepare a defense for what he sees as a clearly political trial, which the SARG is seeking to present as an example of the regime's transparent legal system.)

¶3. (SBU) The presiding judge adjourned the trial until July 25 to give the court a chance to review the statements by Labwani and the lawyers, both of which were admitted into Labwani's file. (Note: The judge still has not yet ruled on whether the Al-Hurra interview may be aired in courtroom.) After the case's adjournment, Labwani's sister tearfully voiced concerns that Syrian authorities would "harm or do even worse" to her brother in jail because of the strong July 16 statement.

¶4. (C) Several days before the trial, members of the Labwani family, including Labwani's wife, Sumer, voiced support for a USG statement on behalf of Labwani and other prominent Syrian political prisoners who are working for freedom and reforms to benefit the Syrian public. At the same time, family members expressed concern that Israeli actions in Lebanon (and the absence of USG condemnation of the actions) could make such a statement a liability. As an aside, Sumer Labwani did not know why the SARG had officially banned her earlier this month from leaving the country. Sumer asserted that she is not involved in political issues, except as an advocate for her husband. (Note: According to another



Labwani lawyer Khalil Matouk, other prominent Syrians who were also banned at the same time are: Suheir Atassi, President of the Jamal Atassi Forum; Mohamad Walid al Bunni, a Damascus Spring prisoner who was released last year; Habib Issa; and Fawaz Tello, a Damascus Spring prisoner who was released last year.)

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